

CHAPTER 9

JOURNEYS TOWARD INTEGRATING FAITH AND PRACTICE: STUDENTS, PRACTITIONERS, AND FACULTY SHARE THEIR STORIES

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Perhaps you remember family vacations that included road trips across the country; trips that started with the unfolding of a map on the dining room table or an internet search for driving directions. You found your current location and your destination. Then you began the exploration of various routes to get there. The journey really started before you opened the map or booted up the computer. It very likely started as you considered your destination and the purpose of your trip. Once you knew where you were going, your focus could move to the “how to” of getting there.

In this chapter we share several stories of one of the most challenging journeys for Christians in social work: the journey toward integration of faith and social work practice. The student perspectives include both their responses while students and their reflections five years later with practice experience in public, private and congregational settings. We are a group of four social work faculty members at a Christian university, Baylor University in Waco, Texas. We spend a lot of time pondering this journey toward integration. We think about Christianity and social work very personally, in relation to ourselves and our callings; we talk about this often with other faculty members on retreats or in meetings. Most importantly, we explore this topic with students in advising, in classrooms, in conducting research with our students, and in continued professional relationships with our graduates. We are intentional in our exploration of this topic because we are deeply affected by our own responses to the question, Where am I on the journey toward integrating Christian faith and social work practice?

Our purpose in writing this chapter is three-fold. First, we want to share with you the stories from Christian students at our university who have been on this journey toward becoming a social worker and from those same students as graduates implementing and refining their own discoveries around the integration of faith and practice. Second, as we present their stories, we comment on the various themes emerging from their reflections as they share stories of seeking God’s plan, dealing with obstacles, and seeking companionship for the journey. At times, we will repeat their reflections as we illustrate the variety of themes we gleaned from their narratives. Finally, we invite you to join with other

Christian travelers as we figure out together various ways to integrate Christian faith and social work practice.

We are addressing our comments primarily to student readers, though we realize that faculty members, social work practitioners, and others may read this chapter. Our hope is to introduce students and others to the stories of our Baylor students and graduates as they reflect on their own journeys. We expect that, for our readers, these conversations about calling have been and will continue to be a central part of the dialogue concerning Christians in social work: a dialogue involving other students, advisors, supervisors, teachers, families, and friends. One last caution: this chapter is not based solely on our data analysis and is not presented as research findings. We report those findings in other publications (Singletary, Harris, Myers, & Scales, 2006). Instead, this is a personal sharing of selected quotes from students and faculty that we hope will serve as information and inspiration as you consider your calling and your pilgrimage. We invite you to travel with us.

The Road Trip of a Lifetime

For the Christian student, the most compelling question, Where am I going? has been answered ultimately: I am going to God, to eternity with my Creator, to Heaven. But if life is truly a journey leading us to our Home, it seems very important to consider how we get there. It is frequently easier for Christian students to talk freely about their eternal destination while struggling significantly with the direction of their life journeys. Which of the many career paths available, for example, shall I take? What is it I am to do with this life I have been given? We look at the life map of possible destinations and consider our options while many voices, from parents to mentors to detractors, offer a variety of pathways. Shall I travel major highways with large loops that let me travel quickly and efficiently, but that guide me around the inner cities where the bustle of life and pain of others is almost palpable? Shall I travel the back roads of life where the pace is slower and the interactions more measured and deliberate? Will my travels take me through many small adventures or will this journey center on one or two defining highways?

For Christian social workers, there is a real sense that we serve a Navigator who has charted our path, who created us with particular gifts and talents to accomplish the purposes of God's creation. But getting the message and instructions of the Navigator that are specific to our journey is often the challenge. Has God called me to a specific work? And if so, how will I hear the call and know the path? We find ourselves asking, What are the roads or pathways that will get me to the work and then through the work to which God is calling mee?

Students called to social work hear the Navigator's voice in a variety of ways. Becoming a social worker is a process, a journey that may begin from any place at any time. Some social workers can trace the beginning of their travels to childhood: parents who modeled for them the giving of self in service of others and encouraged the journey of helping. For some, the journey toward social

work began later in life, after several apparently false starts down roads that were blocked or just seemed to be the wrong direction. Eventually the Navigator provided directional clarity in the midst of disorientation and aimless pursuits. In some cases, graduates found directional clarity as part of the journey. One graduate summed it up this way: "I just keep finding open doors, opportunities leading me to the next step. I simply wait, do the best job I can while waiting for the next step in His plan to emerge."

For Christian social workers, the paths toward life as a Christian and as a professional social worker are traveled simultaneously, leading Christian social work students to explore questions such as these: How does my journey as a Christian intersect with, complement, replicate, or diverge from travel along my journey toward professional social work? One graduate made this observation: "Social work provides me one avenue to fulfill my calling. It allows me to get paid, but more importantly, it allows me to step into other people's lives and help them through tough situations in life. It allows me to walk a journey with others." Students also wonder: Will I be confronted with the choice between two roads, one representing my faith journey and the other representing my professional journey? As graduates, many discovered that the integration of their own faith experience and their practice experience can take place in both secular and non-sectarian settings. Of the follow-up respondents, their experience in public and private agencies was essentially equal. Three of the eight had experience in both public and private agencies over the five year period since graduation.

The question for students is often this: Is there truth in the statement that social work and Christianity really are quite compatible with one another? Is it possible that we have been called by the Navigator to forge a new road that brings our path across the most vulnerable, the most wounded, those lost needing a guide to get back to the road? While graduates worked with both Christian colleagues and colleagues who were not believers and in both public and private settings, they reported that their faith experience was consistently positive in their social work practice. One respondent said it this way:

"I honestly believe that God has brought me down the path I have been on professionally this far, and I have no doubts that He has a future plan for me as well."

That statement rang true with graduates working in both traditional social work agencies and in the church. "I have found I fit best when my mission is expanded beyond that of the church to the many people on the fringes of society who lack even the basic community that most churches offer." This is possible because "I did learn how to walk away at the end of the day and feel confident that God is in control. Because of this skill I anticipate being a social worker for years and decades to come."

Why Social Work Education?

Our students' stories remind us that all journeys must begin somewhere, even though the map has not been secured or the destination is not in view.

Some students are very comfortable with wandering. Some are taking a leisurely journey that may be spontaneous and filled with last-minute decisions about destinations and activities, a bit like buying a month-long rail pass and traveling around Europe. In some instances, students may enter social work to check it out, wander around, and decide along the way what is interesting. In contrast, other students are on a carefully defined path to a very specific destination. They have a particular vocational goal in mind and their social work education is a point on their map. One student described where she hopes to be in ten years:

I want to have started a non-profit [agency] for doing job training for women. For impoverished women-- that's what I would like to be doing in ten years. To get there, I think in two years I am going to be working at an agency doing very micro work.... I really need to have that perspective.¹

One can imagine this student viewing social work classes as particular points on a map that will lead to the ten-year goal.

In some cases, students found their way to social work after developing a commitment to a particular population. For example, one young woman found that she was gifted in working with children so she planned to pursue teaching in a school setting. In conversation with her own teachers she began to broaden her view of careers in which she might work with kids. Soon she was imagining social work as an option. In her own words:

I just easily attached to kids; they easily attached to me. And I was just a real good people person. People said it all the time,... [With social work] I would have more job options... and if I'm a school teacher, then that's what I do with kids, I just teach them, but with social work I could do a whole bunch of different things and I liked that.

Another student began social work in order to work with children and adolescents, but through experience in internships and classes, opened her mind to consider work with additional populations:

I always thought... I was going to work with children. And it's switched a lot. ... our society's changing as well, so Alzheimer's and caregivers are going to be big needs our population is going to have...I definitely could see myself in that kind of field...I have lots of options....

In another case, the student's ultimate goal was ministry, but this student intentionally sought a social work education to gain particular skills and information. Encountering two other travelers with social work competencies motivated this student to walk with them:

I want to connect to people and really help them work through these issues that they've got. I thought that I could do that in seminary, and I think that you can, but when I got in there - that's

where the catch was - when I started asking questions about wife beatings and children getting hit - those things. And when the only two people in the room that knew were social work students, that was what really did it for me. This is some information that I have always wanted to know. How do I get this information? And social work has that information with it.

While this student wanted to pursue social work to gain particular knowledge or skills, another student wanted to journey alongside social workers because she appreciated the value base of the profession:

The first draw that was in my mind was that I thought that social workers worked with the poor, that was the initial lead in. But also, helping the oppressed and the poor in justice issues from a biblical basis and seeing that as a value of the social work profession... So social work values are definitely places that attracted me as a means of vocation or a job where I live out the values.

Where am I going?

In contrast to students who had a clear picture about why they chose social work education, other students were wandering, with or without a compass. One student was simply lost in the journey and stated bluntly "I have no direction on my future at this point." Another traveler expressed outwardly a feeling of confidence that she would find the way as she goes, but at the same time, admits an "uneasy feeling" as well.

To me, at this point, there's still just—it's all very unclear. I'm pushing around things right now, but I'm learning that there are so many options out there and that I have to just kind of give it time to know things will develop, and I'll find it as I go. So I'm doing my education to help give me some more options and some more places, but I can't see down the line right now. And it's kind of an uneasy feeling, not knowing which direction or any of the options that are available—in either direction.

This inability to see around the corner is both the joy and the challenge of traveling free and easy, wherever the wind may take us. We may know that good things can happen along the way and that the path will be there when we need it. But, the uneasiness described above leads to a natural question for students; will we really like what we find along the way? And, perhaps a more troubling question, when we arrive at our destination, will the satisfaction we find be worth the time and effort we have invested?

Sometimes it is easier to see where we are on the path by looking behind us, at where we have been. This student reflects on the calling to social work as a process; looking back, she can see that there were signposts of confirmation points on her journey.

I don't think it was one instance, like one minute, all of a sudden, I was like, I'm called to social work. I think it was a process... the constant affirmation. I believe when people are walking with God, and in His word every day, and are really seeking Him, then He'll lead you in a certain direction, and so as I've been seeking Him throughout college, my college experience and life, I've felt confirmed over and over again to continue in the path of social work. And more so every day, even today, more so than yesterday.

Once graduates entered professional social work, they gained wisdom from looking back to "younger years" and seeing the patterns of God's plan at work. Experience, along with trial and error, often helped students discern the best fit.

In my younger years I identified my calling to be in a faith-based environment. At other times I felt it to be as an academic. Over time I have learned that the pursuits which fit me best are those in which I am able to work with a variety of people and help them at times of crisis. While faith-based organizations offer me this opportunity, I have found I fit best when my mission is expanded beyond that of the church to the many people on the fringes of society who lack even the basic community that most churches offer.

After starting professional and family life, one graduate could take a long view of her calling that began when she was a child and encompasses values she is passing on to her own children:

The feeling of helping others has been with me from a very young age, I have distinctive memories as early as 3rd grade. The urge to help others has never really waned. It has taken different shapes. As I was going through school, it is what helped shaped my professional choices, as well as extracurriculars. Now that I am in my profession and my roles of wife and mother are put above my profession, the idea of helping others looks a little different. I value what it means to help others and I work to teach my children the importance of helping others.

Am I on the Right Road?

One of the lessons we learned from the students and alumni we interviewed was that entering and staying on the path to a vocation in social work can be an uncertain and complicated task. Their experiences made us more aware of the unexpected turns, intersections, and detours that accompany most who travel this way. These honest, onsite reports of the terrain will alert you to the possibility that you may encounter obstacles in the pathway--you or others in your life may question the direction you are going, the accuracy of your map, and the worth of your destination. You will discover that others have traveled the path that you are now on or that you are thinking of entering. They have

much to say about the challenges you face and about how God keeps them on the path and helps them make sense of the journey.

Some students told us that, in the beginning, they didn't want to be on the path toward a career in social work. It seems that God's plan for their life's journey was very different from the life map envisioned by the student. This reflection illustrates how God's plans may not be our plans:

I remember a point where I sat there and I said, 'I don't want to go this direction.' I remember praying and saying, 'God, you got something confused here. You got the wrong plan for the wrong girl.' There was a point where I really remember just about screaming my head off going, 'God; you're just off, here! I don't understand why you're doing this!'

Another student described the experience of misinterpreting God's plan:

I think, for me, I misinterpret God, definitely because I am a selfish person and have my own agenda and my own plans that aren't necessarily in conjunction with His, so I do get a little confused and can't see the line--but I definitely know that from my experience, He's used other people and you know, initially by just planting a seed in my heart, or maybe a desire or maybe just a little interest.

It seems that once these students reluctantly entered the path of God's plan for their Christian vocation, confirmation that they were in the right place reassured the travelers. Students reported confirmation from a number of sources.

This student described the sense of peace that confirmed the chosen path:

I think it's completely natural for me to be in social work. And if I try to pursue other things, it really doesn't give me that sense of peace, it gives me more of a sense of like I don't belong there. That's really the role that social work plays and that's how I feel as far as my calling, when I know that when I'm doing something that God doesn't want me to do, I don't have that peace. And when God wants me to do something and that's where I should be, and that's where I am, I have that sense of peace and I'm fine with it even if it makes me uncomfortable, but I feel just natural to be there.

Confirmation came for graduates when they had opportunities to try different jobs. One graduate suspected in her student years that she wanted to work with children and families and had this confirmed when she tried a different job for awhile:

I believe that I was created to work with youth, and I am unable to imagine myself doing anything else (long-term). I worked a part-time position with a non-medical in home care provider organization (working with the elderly and handicapped)...and although I still enjoyed helping and serving a different group of people.....

my passion for my job just wasn't the same as I have when I am serving children and families.

Graduates had new opportunities to try their skills and get affirmation of their callings from colleagues and clients. "I often get the comment that I'm a good listener or that they [clients] feel a radiant energy from me that is different," says one graduate. "I have always had this sense of calling but my calling has come to be more prominent as I began to do clinical work."

Encountering Obstacles

It became clear to us that unanticipated obstacles are part of the journey, whether you are just entering the path or you are five years down the road. At the beginning, students reported obstacles to their desire to enter the path toward faithful social work practice such as family members who questioned their vocational choices and the public perception of social work. In a few cases, obstacles created temporary loss of destination, which eventually led students to find the professional path God intended for them. Five years later, graduates view the obstacles as more related to their work setting and relationships with colleagues.

Family concerns

Confusion or concern may be the response of parents and family members to students who choose social work as a career. Family members may want to understand the motivation and reasoning that underlie this sometimes controversial decision. These two quotes from students reflect the concerns that some family members may have about the choice of social work as a career:

No matter what I do, there is [from my parents] this, ok what is your reasoning behind this? I think that is a real big key thing, is to see where my motivation is coming from, and seeing, what makes me do this, to make sure I am doing it for the right reasons. Also, I think, part of it is for bragging rights, so that when people ask them, they can say, well, she's doing it because she wants to dah, dah, dah. I get a kick out of that—that that's one of the things that they do.

Another student described a negative reaction to the career path from family:

Oh, well, they definitely have not influenced me to be called to—I mean, they are—my grandparents still are in denial that I am a social work major. I mean, no one in my family wanted me to be a social work major. So, they really have not done anything to encourage me to do that. But I think they just really wanted me to do business. But, I don't know.

Public perception of social work

Professional prestige and societal recognition may affect career choice. This was not an often mentioned concern in these interviews but there were

at least several references to this potential obstacle. One student described a narrow perception of social work when initially considering the profession, asking “Aren’t they just CPS [Child Protective Services] workers?” That was my whole idea of social work. Another student suggested that, “Social work, I guess widely speaking, isn’t that glamorous of a profession.” He described the questions of others:

...is social work a real profession?... people look down on social workers. They don’t think that that’s a real thing. In court, they don’t listen to their testimony, they don’t think it’s real, but that’s just how it was with Jesus.

Obstacles as a path to new directions

Obstacles can detour the traveler in a direction that actually leads to God’s intention for the social work student. Consider this observation:

I wish I could say I was that trusting and that easy to influence on it, but one of the characteristics I have, and it usually has a negative connotation to it, but for me it’s a good thing, is being stubborn. I am someone who’s not very easy to move and be manipulated and I just don’t, I tend to want to stay in the same spot because it’s kind of, I don’t like to move into the unknown very easily and so for me, it seems like it’s one instance after another and I keep getting hit from different directions until I’m finally going, ok maybe this, maybe I’m being told something here. That includes some of the people that I know. I’m wanting to go on this path and I keep getting stumbling blocks that are really actually people who are kind of going, you might want to consider doing this, you’re fitted for this.

Five years later

At least eight graduates currently practice in social work related arenas, seeking to integrate their faith and practice. When we asked them again about obstacles to the integration of faith and practice after five years of practice, their narratives did not repeat the themes of their student days: the influence of family and societal values on vocational choice. Instead, they focused on the influence of their agency’s context on faithful practice. In three cases, the graduates did not report any current obstacles, but found their work facilitated faith integration. For example, one graduate working in a public agency responded: “I have struggled with more ethical integration of state and federal law and social work practice than with the integration of my faith. I feel fortunate enough that my faith actually enhances my practice, and in my opinion, makes me a stronger practitioner, employee, and supervisor.” Another graduate, agreeing that faith could be integrated effectively, attributed this outcome to effective educational preparation:

In this context I feel that the social worker’s ability to address issues of faith in their practice is based largely on the background and

training they received prior to their employment there. Because my background included an emphasis on understanding spirituality as a component of any holistic social work, I am comfortable when my clients discuss the impact of their faith in their lives and I feel confident in my ability to address their faith in ways that does not direct or influence their belief, but better helps them understand how their faith impacts their lives.

Graduates who did report obstacles to the integration of faith and practice focused on their work settings. The graduates offered insight into how their agency's public, private, and/or non-profit status, as well as religious affiliation, shaped their attempts at faith integration. In these contexts, they also highlighted the roles (sometimes supportive and sometimes unsupportive) of colleagues within and outside the organization. By sharing their stories, the graduates revealed interesting and unanticipated ways that agency context and collegial relations can be both facilitators for and obstacles to faithful practice.

Agency context as a facilitator or obstacle

The graduates agreed that practice within a publically funded agency created obstacles to the integration of faith and practice. One reflection captured this observation: "I have currently worked in a public agency for nearly a year. In this context, faith conversation has been isolated institutionally, not only from clients but among employees as well." Another graduate raised a unique client-social worker boundary issue related to practice in a public agency—"I have multiple clients and/or their families who attend my church. Since I do not work at a faith-based agency, trying to figure out boundaries [related to faith-talk] has been somewhat of a challenge."

In spite of these obstacles, the graduates in public sector organizations offered unexpected perspectives on faith life in these contexts. Even though the agency is publically funded, the religious beliefs of the employees and administration may open the organization to accept the role of faith. Consider this observation: "While the agency itself was non-faith based, many of the employees and administrators came from Christian faith backgrounds. This made it easy to address faith in the work environment." Meanwhile, one graduate who has worked in both a public and a private faith-based agency observed that the prohibitions of a public setting actually facilitated her own personal faith and practice development:

I think my faith and the way I integrate faith and practice has become stronger NOT working at a faith-based agency, because I have had to struggle with how to do it and work at it, when it was so easy at the private faith-based agency.

In contrast to public agencies, private, non-profit organizations with a religious affiliation can be a venue for deepening the faith and professional practice conversation. Graduates working in these settings often identified "freedom" and "openness" as primary factors. One graduate who is an educator in a Christian college expressed it this way:

Each time I am asked about the integration of my faith in practice by others, I recognize the freedom I have in my work environment to share my faith and allow it to inform my teaching. These conversations allow me the opportunity to further reflect upon the impact I am able to have in and outside the classroom by integrating faith principles in the ways I interact with students and colleagues.

Another graduate echoed this theme: "...being in settings in which the faith beliefs are a good enough fit has allowed me to integrate faith into practice more openly, whereas that would very likely not be the case in a public agency or college setting."

While some contexts facilitated integration, other settings may also present obstacles. One possibility is that clients are not allowed freedom to embrace their unique beliefs. A graduate working in a non-faith-based setting observed the importance of making additional efforts to ensure clients did not feel pressured to embrace a particular faith.

Taken together, the graduates provided clear evidence that organizational identity may be an important factor in faith and practice integration. Their narratives also reveal the complexity and unpredictability of this relationship; in other words, public agencies may facilitate integration of faith in surprising ways, while religiously affiliated contexts may unpredictably deter integration.

Christian colleagues as supporters and obstacles

Collegial relations of the graduates join organizational status as central themes in the reflections on faith and practice integration. This statement simply and powerfully expresses the observation made by most of the graduates: "It is beneficial to have someone else in the profession who has the same faith background as I do to talk with."

In religiously affiliated agencies, supportive colleagues may be more available and the opportunities for shared involvement in faith practices richer: "When I worked at the faith-based agency I felt more support and more connection with some of my co-workers as we had weekly bible study and prayer time." When the setting does not provide this kind of faith-related sharing, graduates sought support outside of the agency:

Most of my friends/colleagues outside of work are not social workers, however, we talk often about working to change society, but more specifically through the lens mentioned above—Kingdom of God on earth in the here and now. They encourage, inspire, and motivate me to continue striving and though they do not have the social work frame of reference or language, I am able to bridge that gap a bit in our conversations and in work we might do together on the side. With my colleagues, we talk about the integration of faith and practice in the work...

Sometimes Christian colleagues at work present obstacles to graduates who are committed to faithful practice. When Christian colleagues violate ethical principles of self-determination or proselytize in ways that can be viewed as manipulative, the graduates viewed this as an obstacle, though one that could be overcome. Consider this observation:

Surprisingly, there is one specific co-worker of mine who is probably the most outspoken person of faith in our entire agency. I've found this to be a hindrance to our relationship....Unfortunately, I always tend to find the highest number of obstacles among very conservative Christians, whether co-workers or clients. I rarely find it difficult to manage though. It's just a part of life.

Whether or not agency context and work relationships present obstacles or opportunities, graduates affirm the central place of faith in their practice. All of these social work graduates are seeking a path that leads them to ethically live into their vocation and their faith. Their stories provide maps for travelers that aspire to the same destination. The pathway can be clearly marked with signs of confirmation and direction. We also have seen that, along the way, social work students and graduates who embrace Christian faith encounter unanticipated obstacles that disorient and even cause them to lose their way. Amazingly, the God who called them to the journey is also able to set their feet on the life-long path of service and Christian vocation. And, fortunately, Christian social workers do not ever have to travel alone.

Fellow travelers

Social workers know perhaps better than most that no one successfully journeys alone in this life. As you learn how to walk alongside the people you serve, you also may begin to wonder, "Who will travel with me? Family, faculty, supervisors, student colleagues, God?" You may experience the presence of God calling in many ways; some direct and some indirect, but a part of God's calling is found in the voices of those who go with you on the journey.

Students in our program discussed their understanding of God's call through the influence of other people. We heard about direct and indirect influence of family members, co-workers, social workers, faculty, or others who helped students understand social work as an option for responding to God's call. Interpersonal relationships helped students discern God's call to the profession of social work and to know that there was someone on the journey with them. Here we highlight some of these relationships on the journey.

Who will guide my journey? God.

In trusting God's presence in our midst, we heard students describe the meaning of this for their journeys. One student said that "God's hand was there and, just kept guiding me through." Another student offers, "The calling for me is just following what God wants me to do and where God is leading me to." And also, "With me, I feel like God really, strongly directed me towards this."

Who will go with me? Family and friends.

The most common travelers alongside students were their family and friends. Sometimes these loved ones question the turns we make on the journey. Sometimes, they aren't sure how to support us along the way. Looking back on years of family strife, a student reflected on her family's role in her journey saying, "I don't know if my family necessarily, in a positive way, influenced my decision for social work." Yet, other students had different experiences as families ventured forth with them: "I knew that by choosing a profession where I would be helping people," said one student, "I would be understood by my family and they would support that decision because that's what I wanted to do." Another student also voiced the encouragement of family traveling with them, "I think that there is an experience where your family, they are helping me through a lot of this. That's one thing I feel very blessed with, is that they have been very supportive."

Who will go with me? Social workers such as faculty, classmates, and field supervisors.

Social work education offers opportunities for significant relationships that are influential in helping you make your way down the road into professional social work practice. Students spend a great deal of time with classmates, faculty, and field supervisors, who are a part of their journeys of discernment. They often recognize right away the importance of these relationships.

One new student described one of her attractions to the program: "I knew the faculty was very friendly and very interested in their students succeeding." Students commented on the relationships faculty intentionally developed with students on this journey. "I think it's pretty much invaluable," said one student, "At least if it's set up properly, because you can draw on the experience of your professors, who have years of experience in the field, as well as the experience of the people who are even writing the textbooks." Professors are described as mentors in students' lives as they walk alongside them, "they really push to a high standard, but they're also there to, not hold your hand, but support you, encourage you, and I just got a really strong sense of community and support."

Faculty understood the importance of engaging with students. After a weekend of discussions about our own vocational journeys, faculty in our program wrote about the role they envisioned for themselves in walking alongside students: "My assessment is that sharing about our journeys and aspirations enabled us to see and appreciate the complexity and richness of the fabric of our collective relationship," offers one professor. Another adds her reflections, "My renewed awareness of my own calling and what has contributed to living it out has made me more aware of the potential significance of every interaction I have with students. I find myself asking my advisees and other students more open-ended questions about their purpose and urging them to see their inner promptings and long-held dreams."

As students, you also have supervisors guiding you while you learn, preparing you for the road ahead: "I talk to my supervisor constantly about what is

going on with this client,” said one person we interviewed. She lets me do the work, but she is there for advice and consultation. This is uncharted territory for me, but I am learning so much.” Students express appreciation for the learning that comes in supervision. One offers, “It was tremendously helpful to me that my supervisor went out on an assessment with me. I was able to discuss advanced practice with her and it was really good to have her feedback from the assessment.” And another echoes the support on the journey of learning: “In the middle of the crises of moving the clients I was on the phone with my supervisor. I wasn’t sure what to do, and she talked me through it. But she also let me do it on my own, for which I am now thankful. It was a great experience.”

The graduates surveyed for this research bring a slightly different perspective to this discussion. They reflected on what it is like to have or not have colleagues who share their faith while providing social work services together. In some cases graduates found that “my colleagues are working in the same profession because of their philosophy/faith but come from different faith backgrounds.” Often, graduates found that working with colleagues who share their faith experience is a comfort and encouragement. “When I worked at the faith-based agency, I felt more support and more connection with some of my co-workers as we had weekly bible study and prayer time.” In some cases, graduates identified a particular colleague whose support was invaluable: “The discussions that I have with this colleague reaffirm my purpose and the work that I do.” Still others recognized the challenge of faith and practice to some of their colleagues: “Further, while the general social work education I received was second to none, the emphasis on preparing me to address areas of faith in my practice has provided me with an additional tool I feel many of my colleagues lack.” One graduate summed up both the struggle and the blessing of working with colleagues who do not share her faith:

When I worked at the faith-based agency I felt more support and more connection with some of my co-workers as we had weekly bible study and prayer time. At the agency I am at now, there is not the same level of support, I have had to seek support from other sources [friends, family].

Who will go with me? Clients

In social work education, you will have opportunities to reflect upon and then practice traveling with your clients, whether you are in generalist practice, direct practice, or practice with larger systems, you will be asking how to accompany your clients and how they will accompany you on this journey. One graduate from the study reflected on the impact of relationship with clients in this way: “I believe that *social work* is a verb that means working with people.... all types of people, and I find that I am happiest when I am able to work directly with others, and I am able to build ongoing and consistent relationships with my clients in a way that I don’t think I would have in any other area.” This graduate found that her faith was strengthened and encouraged by the work with her

clients. Another graduate affirmed the importance of her work with clients this way: "I'm not just pushing paper around, I'm helping build forever families, keeping children safe, and enjoying every minute of my work."

Our students may be aware of where they have stumbled along the way, but they are not sure that the people they serve understand the challenges of their journeys, "sometimes, it's harder to meet people's needs because sometimes you have to convince them they have needs, or they don't realize they have needs." What this suggests is that students are learning the reciprocal nature of walking alongside others. They walk with clients in hopes of making a difference in their journeys. One student said, "If you can intervene and somehow help them realize that they are worth something and they have true potential, I feel like it changes so many things." After a similar experience with a client, another student said, "That made me feel good because I didn't force anything on him, I just lived right and tried to treat him like I treat anybody else."

As students on the journey into the profession walk with clients, they want to help them, but we know they also learn to "have the clients be the expert of their experience," as one student put it. In this, the clients also walk with students. They help students move further down the journey. Graduates found this to be important and reciprocal as well:

Because my background included an emphasis on understanding spirituality as a component of any holistic social work, I am comfortable when my clients discuss the impact of their faith in their lives and I feel confident in my ability to address their faith in ways that does not direct or influence their belief, but better helps them understand how their faith impacts their lives.

One of the more cogent student responses pointed out through poetry the deep connection students and graduates may experience to their own faith journey and the impact it has on their work with clients. This is a verification of the scriptural admonition that we are able to use the comfort provided to us in order to comfort and minister to and work with others. Here are selected stanzas of her poem to illustrate how environment, opportunity, and God's calling come together for this faithful social worker.

*What is to Become of Her?*²

I see a little girl who is sitting quietly all alone
Watching the clock and waiting for the rest of her family to get home
Her mother is a single parent working hard to care for three
Her father is always in jail so his face she never sees

She is growing up in the projects which is also known as the 'hood'
And the acts of people surrounding her rarely measure up to good
She is no stranger to violence because it is witnessed almost everyday
People often fight and at times are killed simply for looking at someone
the wrong way...

She has multiple skills to do and be all that she wants and more
But she doesn't know if she'll make it because it's life or death just walk-
ing to the store

So what is to become of this little girl who sits alone each day?
With peer pressure and temptation constantly being thrown her way

How can we help this little girl to remain on a path that's right?
And convince her that in due time she'll get to see the finer things in life
In my opinion, in order to help her, we must first believe
That no matter the environment around her she still has a chance to
succeed

Some of you may doubt her chances of being all that she could be
But I know that her success is possible because this little girl is me
It seems as if the odds were against me but I have been the exception to
every rule

And my ability to stand here today is why I've worked so hard at School

Everyday throughout my internship I have been able to see
Students who have less and others who have more but in many ways they
are just like me

Only somewhere along the line some of them have learned to believe
That the way you start life is how you will finish so there's no point in
trying to achieve

So what became of this little girl? Some of you still may not know
Well in spite of all the things around me I found ways to learn and grow
I did so by building relationships with adults who kept me on track
So working in schools and connecting with kids is simply my way of
giving back

Integration of Christian faith and social work practice.

Now we have come to the heart of what we learned from our interviews. If you are reading this book you probably have some interest in exploring the integration of Christian faith and social work. Maybe you are faculty members, like us, who have thought about this for years. Maybe you are a student, who is exploring various aspects of what it means to travel this road. Social work students and graduates who embrace Christian faith seek a path leading to places where they can integrate professional values and ethics with their religious beliefs. The journey down this path usually creates a unique set of opportunities, challenges and blessings.

Opportunities

For some students, Christian faith adds an extra measure of compassion to their work. This student articulated how faith integration may allow the worker to understand the client more completely:

My faith shapes who I am—kind of like my thought processes.... as I'm in social work, I'm learning to evaluate situations and just know who I am and what my beliefs are, but then to see that person for who they are and to work with them in where they're at. So, I think how I approach situations may be different. I may be a little more compassionate than somebody else would be.

Another student explored a similar theme, acknowledging that her own Christian values are a lens through which she sees the world, but this lens does not prevent her from valuing the different perspectives of her clients.

I'm at peace, I guess, as far as, I'm able to discuss with clients about their own views and their own wants and desires for whom—for who they are. Without imposing my own values. Because I realize that my values are, maybe, different from theirs. But that doesn't mean that I cannot help that person.

Perhaps most significantly, a number of students reported the important interplay between their faith and their professional identity and practice. This student described this as “accountability”:

Another great blessing I have had is that it [social work] has made me,—it has held me accountable to my faith. But it has made me more genuine in my faith. It has really made me examine what it means to be a Christian—what it means to minister. The word ministry to me just means doing good social work.....The profession has held me more accountable to my faith, and my faith has held me more accountable to my profession.

Even several years into their professional journey, we hear similar responses to the opportunities graduates have to integrate faith and practice, but this time with more experience guiding them. We heard opportunities for integration in relation to working with individual clients.

Because my background included an emphasis on understanding spirituality as a component of any holistic social work, I am comfortable when my clients discuss the impact of their faith in their lives and I feel confident in my ability to address their faith in ways that does not direct or influence their belief, but better helps them understand how their faith impacts their lives.

From our graduates, with just a few years of practice experience, we can hear their faithful responses that keep them taking advantage of opportunities on the journey: “I just keep finding open doors, opportunities leading me to the next step. I simply wait, do the best job I can do while waiting for the next step in His plan to emerge.”

Challenges and Dilemmas

For some of the students and graduates we interviewed, the potential dissonance between faith and practice created significant, but not overwhelming concerns along the way. For one student this blend was a “dangerous” idea:

I think that calling and social work sometimes can be dangerous words to associate together for the social work profession because you don't want to minimize the professionalism of social work. And by classifying social work as a ministry, is very dangerous. I think that it does take out the element of professionalism that's there. But at the same time—and I am still, I am definitely in the learning process of this—you need to know how to effectively balance faith and practice, because you are never going to be just a social worker....I am going to be going somewhere as a Christian, with the title social worker. And I think that's a wonderful and such an amazing blessing to have that opportunity, but it can be very dangerous because you are representing two amazing things. ... And I think that's why so many people are so afraid of having faith in practice, and those two words together are like an oxymoron to so many people. I think it's sad, but I think there is a delicate balance there.

Other interviewees, preparing for ministry roles, echoed the potential dissonance between the role of social worker and the role of minister.

I like the fact that in social work, you know—there are certain things you can do that you can't seem to do in ministry. And there's the other catch where there are certain things you can't do in social work that you can in ministry. For example, with a pastor, they can openly go in and say, this is what I believe and all of this. In social work, it's not really—that's kind of frowned upon.

Students admitted that learning to do this integration was a process; one that sometimes involved some “hard knocks.” One student, who described the process of integration as “a little confusing,” told us about a learning experience.

For the most part, it's just a hard issue. You take it case by case. I had a hard experience this past semester in my agency where I did an intake and I asked my client if she ever prayed and it helped our conversation and I didn't regret doing it but my supervisor and I had to talk a long time about why that would have been a bad idea and it was hard. In the end I really saw where he was coming from. I just want to know what is best for the client. I just want to be led by the Holy Spirit and not necessarily by the [NASW] Code of Ethics. It's just really hard for me, but I am learning a lot and I am open to learning a lot more.

Some students reported that trying to reconcile the values of the social work profession with Christian values presented a major obstacle for them. One felt

frustrated, stating “I don’t know that I have been able to integrate it [faith and social work] to the point that I feel that it works; I feel really torn.” Another student described in more detail:

I think that there are major conflicts with how I was raised and the element of faith in my life. And that was something I struggled with a lot in undergrad is kind of taking on my parents’ values and the things that I learned in the church, you know things that I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to act, and my expectations on life, and what I needed to do I felt like conflicted greatly with social work, and that troubled me.

As our graduates report back, having gained several years of practice wisdom, we see them celebrate the challenges of making sense out of the integration:

Since graduation I have worked at a faith-based agency for a year and now a public agency for almost five years. When I worked at the faith-based agency I felt more support and more connection with some of my co-workers as we had weekly bible study and prayer time. At the agency where I am now, there is not the same level of support. I have had to seek support from friends and family. At the same time I think my faith and the way I integrate faith and practice has become stronger not working at a faith-based agency, because I have had to struggle with how to do it and work at it, when it was so easy at the private faith-based agency.

From others, we hear how experiences with colleagues and clients continue to serve as challenges for what the integration of faith in their practice means for them.

I encountered obstacles both from colleagues and from clients. I have worked with colleagues who felt clients should share their world view, values, and faith background prior to receiving the full level of help and support available. To these colleagues I provided dialogue and insight into the importance of individual self-determination and the uniqueness of the individual. From clients I have encountered many who desired me to tell them what to believe and to lead them as a spiritual leader would. In these contexts I help the individuals identify more appropriate sources to which they can turn and to help them find some of their answers within themselves and their community.

As graduates look back at us and their time in school, they reflect on what it meant to first learn about faith and practice from our faculty, recognizing that part of the challenge of integration is the diversity of thought on the matter.

I know that when I was a student I saw the honesty of faculty saying, ‘we don’t have this entirely figured out as to what it is supposed

to look like 100% of the time, and part of that is because we don't all necessarily see it the same way,' and that made it okay to say to oneself that I may not have this figured out for myself entirely either.

There is some diversity of thought on how we as faculty approach topics of faith and practice. There is even more in the world of social work practice. Our alumni express the challenge of what it means to incorporate this kind of diversity into their own integration.

I have had friends and colleagues from a diverse variety of backgrounds. The conversations I believe are most meaningful are when I am confronted by someone from a different faith background. Often colleagues from various backgrounds have misunderstandings regarding my faith and religion, while my knowledge of their background is incomplete as well. I believe that such conversations enable both of us to gain a better understanding of one another's faith backgrounds and apply that understanding to clients from those backgrounds and provide better and more informed social work services.

These are the dilemmas that social workers describe on their journey toward embracing the authentic integration of social work and Christian faith. While the struggles are significant and formative, there are also encounters with blessings that mark the journey.

Blessings

In spite of encountering challenges, the students we interviewed reported a wide array of blessings that they perceive as being associated with the blending of Christian faith and professional identity. At a deeply personal level, students indicated that their intentional efforts at integration resulted in "the feeling of inner harmony", "freedom and flexibility", and helping "me realize more of who I am and making me understand... what I want to do." Sometimes the reward is a feeling of comfort and joy as reflected in this statement: "I prayed about it, and I feel great about it."

One frequently mentioned outcome of the intentional integration of faith and practice was that faith was strengthened in the process. For example, "my social work education has shaped my faith and has made me— it's kind of really helped me be a better Christian." These words echoed this same conclusion—"it [social work] has made me more genuine in my faith." This kind of integration may also have the power to change important assumptions. One student described herself as "a Christian wearing the hat of a social worker," with training that "is going to be shaping how I speak to people, even though it [professional education] may not have changed everything how I feel, but it has changed how I think."

As students graduate and begin their professional journeys, the identification of blessings continues. One graduate articulated the way that faith and practice work together this way, "For me at least, I think it is fairly second nature to

integrate faith and practice because I see a lot of overlap in the values of the social work profession and the Christian tradition.”

Furthermore, they are able to be a blessing to others as their faith is expressed in practice, “As a part of my faith I believe that I can do all things through Christ, and I know that I am simply an instrument in his plan. So in my practice I do all that I can to use my gifts and talents as a way to bless those that I am working with and providing services for.”

The process of blending faith and practice seemed to have beneficial consequences for interactions with clients. Consider this observation—“I think that’s my biggest thing that I’ve enjoyed ...it’s what pulled me into it is being able to identify a need and to be aware of needs more than probably the average person is.” One student counted among her blessings: “I have gotten to work with people who I never would have ever talked to or met...” While there may be dilemmas and challenges related to an intentional quest to integrate Christian faith and social work practice, you may also find blessings and opportunities to discover and claim along the way.

Don’t Travel Alone

Whatever you encounter, please know that you do not have to travel alone. Christians have expressed this idea in the worship hymn “The Servant Song”:

*We are trav’lers on a journey,
Fellow Pilgrims on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.*

Engaging the dilemmas and claiming the blessings becomes more possible if you will allow others to travel alongside of you. Perhaps you may find mentors who are willing to walk with you and share the benefit of their own experiences on this journey. Find a Christian social worker or faculty member who cares about you and the integration of faith and practice. Form meaningful and trusting relationships with other social work students who are motivated by their Christian faith. Consider joining the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) and take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate with a community of Christians in social work and to discover resources that are available to help you as you celebrate and struggle with the integration of faith and practice.

As graduates spent time in the field, they learned the value of this lesson in new and meaningful ways. One graduate shares the experience of a small group for support:

I have found that in a group of women that I meet with weekly to have Bible study, we find ourselves talking about our faith and our work. There is another social worker in the group as well and we are able to talk about how our own faith impacts how we do

social work, and how we view the situations are clients are in. It is beneficial to have someone else in the profession who has the same faith background as I do to talk with.

Another shares the value of conversations with other peers:

Most of my friends/colleagues outside of work are not social workers, however, we talk often about working to change society, but more specifically through the lens mentioned above - Kingdom of God on earth in the here and now. They encourage, inspire, and motivate me to continue striving and though they do not have the social work frame of reference or language, I am able to bridge that gap a bit in our conversations and in work we might do together on the side.

With a few years of practice, the experience of not traveling alone shows it has the power to sustain and inspire. Traveling companions make a meaningful difference in helping us understand where we are going and they help us appreciate the journey itself.

It Really Is All About the Journey

The scriptures are replete with journey metaphors that help us understand that our relationship with God and our response to God's call is about the day to day living out of our faith rather than rushing headlong toward a destination. Moses, called to deliver the people, died after a life of leadership with the discovery that his ministry was about the journey, not about the destination. Saul was out looking for donkeys when Samuel found him and communicated God's call for leadership. David was tending sheep when God called him to lead an army and eventually a nation. Jesus' ministry occurred from village to village as he traveled, preached, healed, and loved. He called to his disciples (who were not sure where he would take them), "Come follow me." He invited them to participate with him in ministry rather than to arrive at a particular destination.

We know from the life and ministry of Jesus that the journey is not always easy or without challenges. The words of our students, both during their time in the program and after graduation, confirmed that in spite of challenges, they found strength to continue, by faith, as followers of Jesus, to travel with Him as He equips us and leads us to the hungry, the poor, the broken in body and spirit, the dying, the rejected and lonely, the least of these. Let us journey on together, bound by the call to be fellow travelers with the One who taught us best about the ministry of presence.

We end our chapter with a prayer offered up for social workers by our dean, Dr. Diana Garland, long-time NACSW member and former president. It is our intercession on behalf of you who are joining us on the journey.

We are grateful, Lord God, that when you call us on this journey,
You don't call us to walk it alone.
We thank you for one another to share the journey,
To comfort and encourage one another.
Hold us together, Lord; hold our hands and steady us on the way.
Show us just the next steps to take—
We don't need to see all the way, for we trust the destination to you.
Give us courage to go, step by step, with one another and with you.

Endnotes

1 This and all other quotes are from interviews conducted in 2004-2005 with Baylor University students and in 2010-11 with Baylor alumni. To protect their anonymity, names will not be cited.

2 To preserve interviewee anonymity we will not cite the author's name here.